

Career Path

Passion for the creative process

by Lou Henry



Keith Griffiths,
chairman
Aedas Limited
Photo: Nolly Leung

Keith Griffiths jokes that he only studied architecture because he "wasn't good at anything else." Given his rise to success in the challenging industry, however, it is obvious that there is more to it than that.

His passion and talent for design, allied to his intuitive business ability had a significant effect. Even now, he cannot sit at a table without a drawing pen and paper in front of him.

Hailing from the UK, Mr Griffiths first came to Hong Kong in 1982 with renowned architecture firm Foster and Partners, to build the HSBC building in Central. On its completion, though still relatively young in the field, he decided that to return home after such a mammoth project would be a step backward so instead he struck out on his own. "After being a part of the making of what is still one of the best buildings in the world, why would you want to work for someone else?" he asks.

Twenty years on, after growing his company with the help of strong and able professional partners, Mr Griffiths became chairman of Aedas Limited, the fourth largest architecture and design company in the world. "Within the next five years we'll be the biggest," he says.

Gamut of choices

Mr Griffiths believes the three most important areas for an architect to be skilled in are communication, analysis and design. "Though with two out of three you could still do all right," he adds.

Typically, he explains, a client approaches an architect with a site, a financial model and area requirements for a project. The architect has to be able to visualise a spatial solution to this data (the analysis), and then produce (by design) this in a form the client can understand (communication).

As well as communicating with clients, an architect also needs to work well with colleagues. "Architecture involves complex problems that no one person can fix," Mr Griffiths says. "We work as a team." When considering clients, other architects, engineers, builders, managers, government officials and a range of others who play a part, an architect may have to deal with more than 500 people on a project.

While this diverse array makes it important for people to be multi-skilled, it also allows for specialisation. Mr Griffiths prefers the design aspects of the job and spends about half of his time doing this, limiting managing and liaising to 25 per cent each out of his workday. Another colleague, he says, prefers the administrative side and enjoys discussing with clients, government officials and lawyers, and yet another concentrates on sales and marketing. All these partners are highly skilled professional architects.

"Stay with the creative process"

Mr Griffiths stresses that an architectural company can only succeed through the diverse strength and talent of the professional architectural partners.

As well as these areas, architects can also specialise in the type of buildings they designs. "There are

choices of residential, serviced apartments, hotels, spas, resorts, retails — to name a few — and combinations of any or all of these," Mr Griffiths says. "With so many options and so much to learn and do, it's hard to get bored."

New trends

Architecture has changed dramatically in recent times as the computer has all but replaced the architect's signature tool — the drawing board. This has allowed greater creativity in the design process and buildings have evolved from their traditional box-like shapes. Previously, Mr Griffiths says, an architect was limited because a 3D object is hard to define on a piece of paper. With a computer, however, it is easier. As the technology continues to improve, an architect is only limited by the individual's flair.

For local students considering a career in the industry, Mr Griffiths says they should be thinking beyond Hong Kong. As the city is already so developed the majority of work is on the mainland or overseas. "Most architects here work in China," he says. "But there is also plenty of building happening in Southeast Asia, India, and Eastern Europe. The whole world has a shortage of architects and there is a massive amount of work."

Mr Griffiths adds that having a world-view, curiosity and an interest in travel are part of being an architect anyway. Like any creative industry, he says, it is important to study, travel, and be exposed to other's work. An architect should sometimes expect to spend more time on the road than in Hong Kong, though generally travelling would make up about a quarter of the job.

The best part of being an architect is the creative process, according to Mr Griffiths. "It's enormously satisfying to see other people using and enjoying a building that you designed," he says.

Mr Griffiths' passion for his work is obvious and he says that this is part of the job. "When clients are trusting billions of dollars to you, your social life has to revolve around the work." Far from being a hindrance, he says it is huge fun.

As final words of advice for aspiring architects, Mr Griffiths urges, "Stay with the creative process." He says that all young architects reach a crossroads in their career within about five years after finishing university, when a client or another company will try and tempt them away with what seems like a better offer. In those first few years, he cautions, the work is intensive, the hours long and the remuneration not particularly excellent, and as a result, many consider leaving the industry. "Don't be deflected into project management and administration," he says. "Stick with it and before long your choice will pay off."



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